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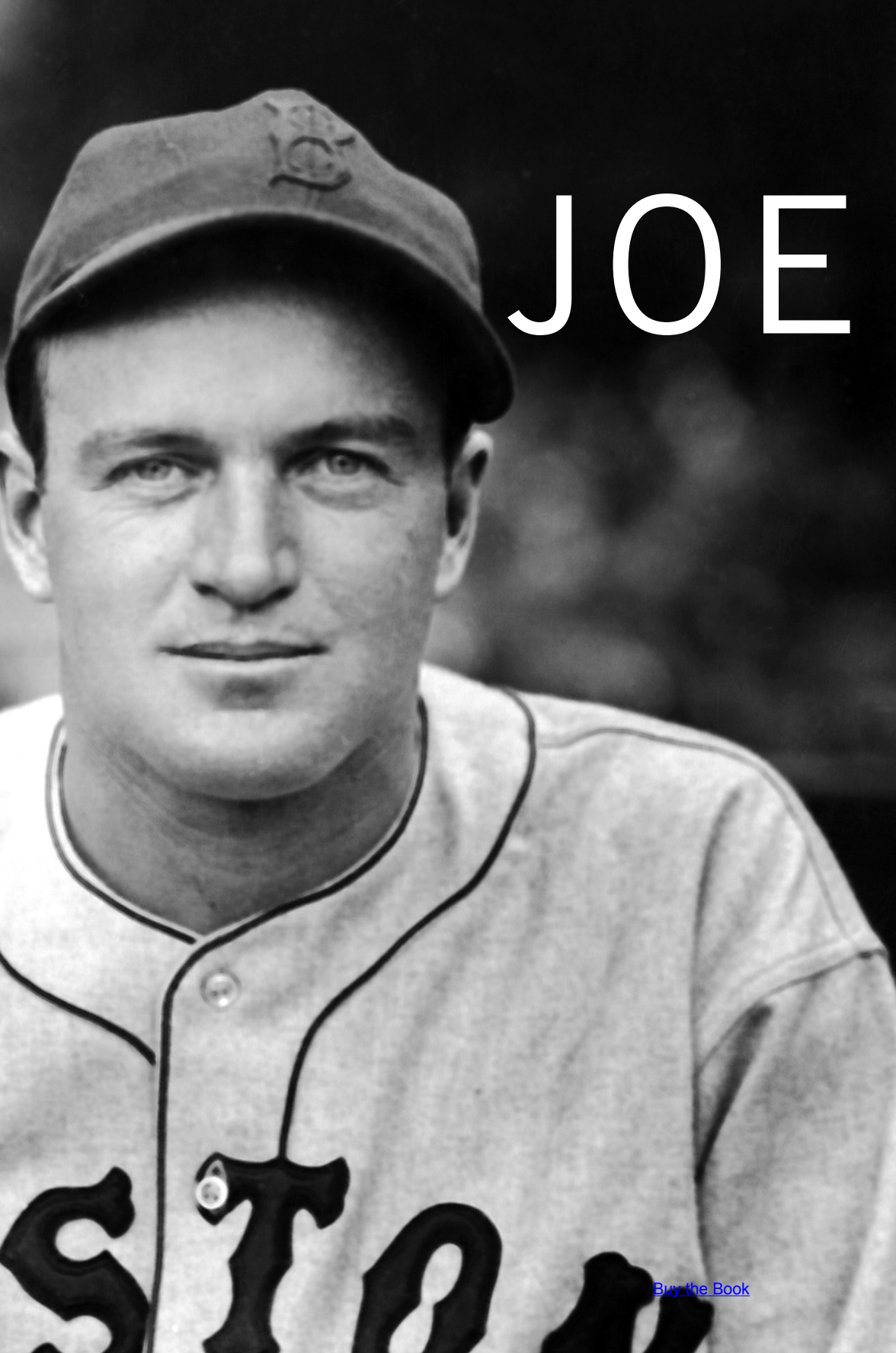
Joe Cronin: A Life in Baseball

Mark Armour

Joe Cronin



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CRONIN

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Mark Armour

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To my father, Laurence, who was never too tired to play catch, and my mother, Elizabeth, who encouraged my writing as early as the fourth grade. You made this book possible, and I only hope I have learned half of what you taught me.

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Joe Cronin

Prologue

Tuesday, May 29, 1984, was a damp and miserable night at Fenway Park. The Boston Red Sox were playing host to the Minnesota Twins, and it was Jimmy Fund night, an annual affair from which the Red Sox donated all net proceeds to the team's long-time charity. Making the event historical, the Red Sox planned a pregame celebration to retire the uniform numbers of Ted Williams (9) and Joe Cronin (4), the first players they had ever so honored. Only 15,472 tickets were sold, however, and fewer than ten thousand fans braved the conditions to head to the park for a game that might not be played. In the *Boston Globe* the next day, Peter Gammons referred to the dismal crowd as "the bittersweet part of the occasion" and reflective of "the state of the franchise's current interest."[1] Though the season was just eight weeks old, the club was already seventeen games out of first place.

The Red Sox decision to retire the two numbers, announced the previous November, had been met with some confusion. No one had worn Williams's number since his dramatic home run twenty-four years earlier in the final at bat of his storied career, and most fans believed that his number had already been retired. In fact, the club had never held a ceremony, made a public pronouncement, or recognized the number anywhere in the park. They had just never let anyone else wear it. As for Cronin's 4, it had been worn regularly in the thirty-seven years since Cronin took it off in 1947, most recently by Carney Lansford in 1982. Few fans would have known what number Cronin had worn.

John Harrington, a team consultant and future ceo, had pushed for this night. He had lobbied Haywood Sullivan and Jean Yawkey, the team's two principal owners, both of whom were initially reluctant. Once you start retiring numbers, they felt, when does it stop? To combat this argument, Harrington set out to develop a strict set of

criteria, for which he enlisted Dick Bresciani, the club's public-relations director and historian. The two men came up with three: membership in baseball's Hall of Fame, ten or more years playing for the Red Sox, including the last five of their playing career. When Harrington presented his proposal to Yawkey and Sullivan, he told them that only two men qualified for the honor: Cronin and Williams.[2]

The decision to retire the numbers was made in the fall of 1983, and a formal event was planned for the following spring. Had the event been for Williams alone, it might never have come off—he was generally uninterested in ceremonies or honors, especially when they involved him. Convincing Williams to give up a few days of fishing would not have been easy. But the main impetus for the evening was not to honor Ted Williams, who had been honored plenty; it was to honor Joe Cronin. Cronin was very ill, confined to a wheelchair, and suffering from cancer that would take his life less than four months later. For Cronin, a beloved former teammate, manager, and general manager, Williams enthusiastically signed on. He would be there. The night would go on.

Williams and Cronin made for an interesting pairing. They had very little in common within baseball or outside it. Williams joined the Major Leagues as an extraordinary once-in-a-generation talent but spent his entire career battling bouts of rage and immaturity. No one ever accused Joe Cronin of being immature—he behaved like a ten-year veteran when he broke in and was managing a Major League team at age twenty-six. Cronin was a family man, a devoted churchgoer, a gentleman who wore suits and watched his language in front of women. Williams was none of those things and never would be. Williams was a rebel. Joe Cronin did not have a rebellious bone in his body.

Cronin loved nothing more than being around baseball people, attending baseball games and functions, and talking with the press. Williams was a student of the game and could talk for hours if you wanted to talk about hitting, but he spent very little time with baseball people unless he had to and feuded with the press his entire career. When the season was over, Williams would practically disappear until spring

training, off fishing somewhere. Cronin's off-season was a whirlwind of meetings, baseball dinners, and socializing. When he became general manager of the Red Sox he instituted a weekly press briefing—there was rarely news, but it gave him an excuse to talk baseball.

Though very different men, Cronin and Williams grew to respect and love each other. Williams later admitted wishing he'd had some of what Cronin had—the family life, the friends, the peace and happiness. It is not hard to imagine Cronin wistfully admiring Williams's rebelliousness, wondering what it would be like to discard the tie before dinner, to fling the bat, to yell at the crowd that booed him. What the two had in common—a love of baseball and their teammates and fellow players and extreme personal generosity—would sustain them through Williams's many rough patches.

The big night still almost did not come to pass. Cronin lived an hour and a half from Boston, in Osterville on Cape Cod, and resisted making the trip almost to the minute he had to leave. Cronin dearly wanted to see all of his old friends but not in his deteriorating condition. Finally, the day before the event, he and his wife Mildred were driven by a neighbor, Laura O'Neill, to the Park Plaza Hotel in Copley Place. When he arrived, he was greeted by several members of the Twins' front office. Cronin had requested the night involve the Twins, for the club's two principal owners—Calvin Griffith and Thelma Haynes—were Mildred's brother and sister, and many other family members worked for the team. The Cronins' oldest son, Tommy, worked in sales for the Twins and was in Boston for the big event. "The next morning," Mildred later related, "that darling Ted Williams came up to the hotel room, and Ted and Joe spent two hours talking about old times."[3]

That evening, the Cronin entourage all made it to the park in time for the 7:30 ceremony. Though he badly wanted to, Cronin decided at the last minute that he could not go out on the field, instead sitting with Mildred in a luxury box above the third base stands. On the field below them sat a ring of dignitaries, including commissioner Bowie Kuhn, American League president Bobby Brown and his predecessor Lee MacPhail, Sullivan, Yawkey, and former teammates Johnny Pesky

and Bobby Doerr. Representing Cronin were his four children and several grandchildren, some of whom were running around second base. Williams had three children during his three marriages, but on this night was joined only by John Henry, a fifteen-year-old son he hardly knew.

Mrs. Yawkey, whose late husband had purchased Cronin for a record-setting price fifty years earlier, spoke briefly, saying: "Joe, Ted, we of the Red Sox organization always loved you as do the fans of New England. We will always love you because you are the Red Sox." Both men received the Thomas A. Yawkey Award for their many years of support to the Jimmy Fund. In presenting the award to Williams, Pesky also spoke to his old manager: "Joe, thank you for letting me play. Those were great years." Doerr presented Cronin's award to his daughter Maureen, while thanking Joe for "giving me a look in 1937 for the Red Sox." When Cronin's name was announced the organist played the Disney song "When You Wish upon a Star," a favorite of his.[4]

But the person everyone wanted to hear, as always, was Williams, and the great slugger devoted most of his remarks to his fellow honoree. "One of the best things about playing in Boston," Williams told the crowd, "was I got to play for manager Joe Cronin. You don't realize what an impact he had on me. I have great respect for a very, very wonderful man. Joe Cronin was a great player, manager, and wonderful father and nobody respects you more than me." Visibly emotional as he gestured to Cronin in his box above, he added, "In my eyes you're a great man." Cronin returned the wave, equally moved. Finally, the Red Sox unveiled the two huge numbers, in their classic Red Sox font, on the right-field façade below the ever-present Jimmy Fund billboard.

The ceremony delayed the start of the baseball game until 8:30. At the end of four innings the Twins had built a 5–0 lead, the Red Sox managing just one hit and eight strikeouts against Frank Viola. When the Red Sox took the field in the top of the fifth, the rains that had pelted the city all day and washed out batting practice came back with a vengeance. After a delay of an hour and forty-one minutes, the

umpires called the game, wiping out the Twins likely victory. Cronin and Williams, whose ceremony had delayed the game, had helped the club one final time.

"Joe to me was the main concern," related Williams during the rain delay. "Talking with Joe and seeing him smile made the night. I've talked to him on the phone and the greatest thing that could happen to him now is to hear from old ballplayers or get out to see a game like he did tonight."[5] Williams and Cronin would speak on the phone regularly the rest of the summer but would never see each other again.

After the ceremony, Cronin was helped to the pressroom, where he had spent so much time in the previous fifty years. He had a message to deliver to the fans: he had so wanted to be down on that field one more time, to tell the fans how he much he loved them, and to return the complements Williams had paid. But his body simply could not do it. "It was too tough," he said. Cronin also denied any difficulties dealing with Williams: "He was perfect. He never missed a bus, never missed batting practice, never missed anything. He never griped either."[6]

The old shortstop glowed that night. His friends and family still recall how happy he was seeing old friends, being at Fenway Park. He told his children how appreciative he was that the Red Sox had gone through so much trouble for him, long past the time of his contributions to the club. They had honored him with on-field ceremonies twice before: in 1938, to recognize his excellence as a player and manager (he received a silver service, and an Irish terrier that he named Red Sox), and in 1956, to celebrate his induction into baseball's Hall of Fame. This time was better. Williams was right: Cronin needed this night, needed to be around baseball, the game that had meant everything to him for nearly all of his seventy-seven years.

1 San Francisco

At 5:12 a.m. on April 18, 1906, a massive earthquake rocked the vibrant city of San Francisco, California. The devastation wrought by the tremors, along with the resulting fires that burned for four long days, created one of the largest natural disasters in American history, comparable in scope and cost to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The city of San Francisco reported only 498 deaths, but this figure was almost certainly a deceit by officials concerned about real-estate prices and potential investments in the recovery efforts. Later estimates raised the figure to at least 3,000 dead, but many immigrants in the city—especially the Chinese—would never be properly accounted for. The true death toll may have been 5,000 to 10,000.[1]

At the time of the earthquake, nearly 400,000 people lived in San Francisco,[2] the ninth-largest city in the United States and the cultural and financial center of the American West. Four days later, 490 city blocks, containing an estimated two-thirds of the property value of the city, had been destroyed, leaving 250,000 people homeless. Nearly all of the banks, hotels, and retail stores lay in ruins, along with most of the city's oldest and most fashionable neighborhoods.[3]

As difficult as it might be to imagine today in light of the Katrina disaster, various state and federal agencies acted quickly to rebuild San Francisco and helped organize massive volunteer efforts. The first relief train arrived from Los Angeles on the first night, and the next day the U.S. Congress approved funds that allowed the army to begin sending trains filled with supplies, rations, and tents. Relief soon flowed from Great Britain and Europe. Within three years twenty thousand new buildings had sprung up. In 1915 the city hosted the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, a world's fair, ostensibly to celebrate the opening the previous year of the Panama Canal but more

to show the world the city's remarkable recovery. Eighteen million visitors attended the fair, making it a memorable success.[4]

Part of the public-relations strategy of the civic leaders was to place the blame for the city's terrible destruction completely on the fires, most of which resulted from natural-gas mains broken by the tremors. A week after the disaster the real-estate board met and agreed to a resolution that the term "the great earthquake" could no longer be used. It was the "great fire."[5] Any city can have a fire, the reasoning went, so building a home or a business in San Francisco was no more risky than anywhere else. This deception was only partly successful. Though the city rebuilt quickly, most of the West's industry and population growth was diverted south to Los Angeles, which soon replaced San Francisco as the West Coast's economic center. However, San Francisco did restore its reputation as a destination for travelers from all over the world.

Among San Francisco's many homeless after the earthquake was the family of Jeremiah Cronin, a teamster whose horses surely came in handy in the city over the next few years. Born in 1870 in County Cork, Ireland, Jeremiah made his way to San Francisco in 1886. As with many immigrants of this period, things did not work out exactly as he had hoped. Work days were long and difficult even before the quake and fires, and for men like Jeremiah, the city's working poor, the rebuilding of their city meant even more work and ever longer days. Jeremiah's wife, the former Mary Caroline, was a native San Franciscan, born in 1870. Mary's parents had emigrated from the old country, County Athlone.[6] At the time of the city's devastation, Jeremiah and Mary had two sons, twelve-year-old Raymond and nine-year-old James, and Mary was expecting a third child in the fall.

Like most people who lived through the fires, the Cronins had their story to tell. Their home in the heart of the city was destroyed, forcing the family of four to move in with Jeremiah's sister, Hannah Coughlin. Hannah and her family had a small house on Twenty-ninth and Sanchez streets in the Mission District, and it had been thankfully spared. The only object Jeremiah saved from his house was an old rocking chair, which stayed in the family for years and played a

prominent role in most family reminiscences about the city's famous earthquake.[7]

A story was later told of Jeremiah watching the city burn from a bar he frequented on Russian Hill, not far from where the family lived.[8] Jeremiah was not happy in San Francisco and often regretted his decision to leave Ireland for a better life that had not come. Seeing the city being destroyed in front of his eyes, he knew that he would have steady work for the foreseeable future but that his days would be hard ones. For many years, teams of horses, run by men like Jeremiah Cronin, carried tons of debris from the heart of the city to the bay, creating or defining the city's famous bay fronts and wharves and making room for many of the buildings that mark the city today.[9]

The Cronins' third son, Joseph Edward Cronin, was born on October 12, at the family's temporary home with his aunt in the Mission District. After the christening Jeremiah playfully shook a fist at little Joe and warned, "If I ever catch ya near a horse, I'll shoot ya."[10]

When Joe was a few months old, the family of five moved into their own home, a small two-story house that still stands at 412 Persia Avenue in the city's Excelsior District. The Excelsior is in the far-southern end of the city, about two miles west of Candlestick Point, and a century ago was a neighborhood of farms and inexpensive homes. The neighborhood was relatively untouched by the earthquake, and became a destination for many displaced families.[11] The Cronins were one such family, and they stayed in the house on Persia Avenue for nearly thirty years. It was located in a quiet neighborhood away from the active urban renewal going on to the north. Young Joe raised rabbits and chickens in his backyard.

The central elements in young Joe's life were church and school. He attended the Roman Catholic Church of the Epiphany a few blocks away at least once a week throughout his childhood and remained a regular churchgoer for the rest of his life. The Cleveland School, which Joe attended through eighth grade, was also a short walk from his house. With his father working long hours, Joe's mother Mary was the central figure in his childhood, a strong woman who preached

traditional values about God and education. Joe loved his mother dearly and spoke of her often to his own children decades later.[12]

But from a very early age Joe Cronin wanted nothing more than to play sports. There is no indication that either of his brothers, each several years older, were athletes. By the time Joe was a few years old his brothers were teenagers and holding down jobs. While his father worked, his mother kept the house running. When it came to making his way in the new neighborhood, Joe was more or less an only child.

The Excelsior Playground, equipped with a baseball diamond and tennis courts, was just one block away from Joe's house and part of a well-managed recreational system in the city. Each neighborhood had its own playground, and each playground employed a caretaker in charge of maintaining the grounds and a director who organized teams at various levels in several sports. Each playground fielded teams in baseball, basketball, soccer, and several other sports with the staff doubling as coaches and umpires. The rivalries with other playgrounds were intense.[13]

Joe Cronin, possessing an excess of nervous energy and with no siblings near his age, spent hours at the playground every day and played on every team he could. He participated in soccer, ran track, and played basketball. In 1920 at age fourteen, he won the city's tennis championship for his age group, a story he retold often in later years. "I never had the price of a pair of tennis shoes, but one year when I was 14," Joe recounted, "Stella Harris, our playground director, bought me my first pair out of her own pocket. I won the city-wide championship in those shoes." Harris remained a lifelong friend.[14]

But like most San Francisco boys of his time, baseball was the most important sport. "I cannot remember a day," he later recalled, "when I didn't want to be a ballplayer."[15] In San Francisco, with its mild winters and cool summers, there were leagues all year-round. He began his career as a pitcher and was, by all accounts, a good one. He became a shortstop, writer Joe Williams later reported Joe told him, "because he could not see eye-to-eye with the umpire."[16]

The Pacific Coast League (PCL) was born three years before Joe,

and to the boys of the city there was no greater aspiration than to someday play for the Seals, the Coast League's San Francisco franchise. The local heroes played in Recreation Park, located at Fifteenth and Valencia, and Joe was not alone in trying to see them any chance he got. Joe never took much interest in his schoolwork, but when the Seals began giving tickets to local schools for students who exhibited good attendance and behavior, the promotion had the intended effect on young Cronin, who earned the tickets several times.[17] Joe later referred to the park as "the hallowed ground of Willie Kamm," referring to the third baseman who played four years for the Seals starting when Joe was twelve and who was sold by the Seals to the White Sox for a record price of $100,000 while Joe was in high school. "Yeah, I idolized Willie—so did half my friends—and then years later I found myself playing in the major leagues against him."[18]

Though San Francisco was nearly two thousand miles from the nearest Major League team, the city had a rich baseball tradition exemplified both by the Seals and by the number of excellent players who grew up there and were in the Major Leagues during Cronin's childhood. Ping Bodie, another of Joe's childhood heroes, had grown up in the Cow Hollow neighborhood, played for the Seals, and starred for the White Sox and Yankees in the 1910s. Harry Heilmann led the Seals to the 1915 PCL championship, then embarked on a great career with the Detroit Tigers. George Kelly began his long career with the Giants in 1915. Babe Pinelli played eight years in the Majors, followed by twenty-two years as a National League umpire. Lefty O'Doul, the pride of Butchertown, made it to the Seals in 1917 and played and managed in the city for thirty years before and after his own fine Major League career. All of these men, and several others, returned to San Francisco every winter and were role models for aspiring schoolboy baseball players.

For Joe Cronin, nothing could compare with watching the Seals play at Rec Park. In fact, Joe would often jump on the back of passing trucks to get to the games. "Funny thing about that," Joe recalled sixty years later, "I learned that you could get into Recreation Park if you went down there early and helped the man who was in charge of the

turnstiles. So I went down bright and early one day and helped this fellow set up, and sure enough he let me in. I was the first person in the ball park, and I went out to the bleachers to watch the players warm up." Unfortunately, Joe got so excited when a loose ball came near him in center field that he jumped onto the field, retrieved the ball, and tossed it back to the players. "After dreaming all night long about how I was going to get in free, I got myself kicked out before the game even started."[19]

Besides Bodie and Kamm, Cronin later recalled having one other baseball idol as a boy: Tony Lazzeri. Lazzeri, just three years older than Joe, grew up in Cow Hollow like Bodie had and starred in several sports for Jackson Playground. Joe could not keep his eyes off him. "It was Tony who booted the ball to win the soccer match, or got the hit that won the ball game, or carried the pigskin for the touchdown," Joe later recalled. "I was always imitating Tony."[20] Lazzeri did not go to high school, instead working alongside his father at a local iron-works factory. When his local playground needed him, he got off work and, more often than not, provided what his team needed to win.

As soon as Joe was old enough, he had to help out the family by delivering newspapers, running errands for the local merchants, or just helping his mother keep the house running. But no doubt his athletic notoriety helped him earn a job working for Stella Harris, the Excelsior Playground's director. By the age of nine he had begun showing up to games early to help Harris roll the baseball diamond for two cents, but within a few years he held an official position on the staff and eventually became a roving substitute with other playgrounds in the city. When playground directors in the city were sick or vacationing, Joe was called upon to take their place for a day or a week. He often tutored future Major Leaguers like Frank Crosetti, Eddie Joost, and Dario Lodigiani.[21] The idea that he would someday play for the Seals was a dream that kept Joe working at baseball every day.

After graduating from Cleveland Grammar School in 1920, Joe attended Mission High School for two years, about a four-mile trolley ride to the north but fortuitously just a few minute's walk from Recreation Park and the Seals. As a sophomore at Mission he teamed

with future National League star Wally Berger to help win the city public-school baseball championship—Berger played third base and Cronin second base.[22] (Another teammate, Jack Shelley, later served eight terms in the U.S. Congress before becoming San Francisco's mayor.) Not long after winning the 1922 baseball title, Mission High School burned to the ground, an event Joe later jokingly blamed on various school chums.

While Mission High was being rebuilt the next fall, classes were temporarily held in a local Protestant church. This turn of events was too much for a devoted Catholic like Mary Cronin to bear, so the family transferred Joe to the parochial Sacred Heart High School, about six miles north in the heart of the city. Heilmann and Pinelli had attended Sacred Heart a few years earlier. Dolph Camilli was a student there two years after Joe. Former heavyweight boxing champion Gentleman Jim Corbett might have been the school's most famous graduate.

Joe played baseball, soccer, and basketball for his new school, and earned extra money working as a basketball referee. "I played anything that didn't cost anything," Joe later recalled.[23] By this time Joe had played these sports all over the city, so he knew many of the athletes at his new school and elsewhere. "I used to carry my spikes to school, and when we had the time we would organize what we called 'hitting leagues,' with a boy taking 20 minutes at bat and then shagging flies."[24] His 1924 baseball team won the city-wide prep-school championship, with Joe acting as captain.

In addition to the organized playground leagues, the city also had several other sandlot baseball circuits organized by local companies. In 1923 Joe joined the Columbia Park Boys Club, which had a great team in a high-quality league that was run by the *San Francisco Examiner*. Joe's team was organized by a local philanthropist, who took the team on an annual trip down the Pacific Coast, stopping several times along the way to play local semipro teams. This trip marked Joe's first excursion away from the Bay Area. The club was followed by several scouts from the Pacific Coast League and the Major Leagues. The winners of the *Examiner* league each received a Bill Doak–model glove, providing additional motivation for the boys while making

Doak, a dependable but unspectacular National League pitcher of the time, one of the better-known players in the city. Cronin's club won the gloves in 1923.

During the spring of 1924, Joe's senior year, he was offered a baseball and basketball scholarship by Slip Madigan, the athletic director at St. Mary's College. St. Mary's was a private Roman Catholic school in Oakland (it moved to Moraga in 1929), which had sent many players to the Major Leagues, including Harry Hooper and Dutch Leonard. Joe had little interest in college, but his family urged him not to turn the offer down right away and give it some thought. In the meantime, Joe was playing baseball for his high school and several sandlot teams.[25]

At this early age Joe had already begun to exhibit the work ethic that would sustain him into his Major League career. Possessed of great athletic ability and a genuine love of baseball and other sports, he nonetheless outworked everyone at every level up the baseball ladder. This nature would inform his philosophy as a manager and general manager in later years, to the point that he believed that mediocre players could become very good players by working harder. After all he had done that very thing. Of course this discounts his obvious baseball talent, and Joe would eventually learn that sometimes hard work was not enough to make a player as good as he had been.

In the summer of 1924 Joe earned money playing baseball for the first time, with a semipro club in Napa, north of the city. Before he graduated from Sacred Heart, he played under the name of Joe Smith, reverting to his real name when high school finished. The club played on Sundays, and Joe eventually made $12.50 per game. In addition to this stipend, he also earned money by continuing to help out at various playgrounds and held a part-time job as a bank teller. All of this money went to his parents to be used just like any other money that came into the household.

In order to get to the Sunday games in Napa, Cronin first went to 6:00 mass at his neighborhood parish, got on a trolley at 6:30, which took him to the waterfront on the northern end of the city, then took a two-hour ferry ride to Vallejo, and finally a one-hour trolley to

Napa.[26] (San Francisco was still largely landlocked—the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge opened in the late 1930s.)

The seventeen-year-old Joe Cronin was nearly six feet tall but weighed no more than 140 pounds, with dirty blond hair, striking Irish blue eyes, and his trademark cut jaw. Skinny as a rail, he was nonetheless the Napa team's star, and the battle for the league championship with San Mateo drew quite a bit of local attention. The title contest, played in San Mateo to the south, was of such interest that Joe's parents paid the twenty-five-cent streetcar fare to come watch him play. Unfortunately, Joe had badly injured his ankle in a game a few days earlier and was not able to take the field. Late in the game he was put in to pinch hit and slugged what would have been a home run, but Joe had to settle for a game-winning single after he hobbled to first base. This story and Joe's picture were in the city papers the next day.

In the fall of 1924 Cronin played for the San Leandro club in the Eastbay League and continued to gather attention for his play. "In the game at the Coast League park last Sunday afternoon," reported the *Oakland Tribune*, "[Joe] hammered out a pair of triples to the right field fence and got a single. He is a tall boy, who has a wonderful pair of hands, and knows what it is all about when he gets into action."[27]

Joe's family could hardly believe that their seventeen-year-old son was making more money than his father for playing baseball and helping out in the playground. One Sunday Joe came home with $12.50 for playing a game that day. "If I had only known that a few years ago," exclaimed the impressed Mrs. Cronin, "I would have made both Jim and Ray become ballplayers." By 1920 Joe's brother James had joined their father as a teamster, while Raymond was a clerk. The reasonable expectation was that Joe, no great scholar, would eventually, perhaps after some time at St. Mary's, have to learn a trade. This all changed in the summer of 1924, when the pro scouts first showed up at the door on Persia Avenue.

Joe still dreamed of playing for his hometown Seals. By the summer after his graduation he had become enough of a local star that he would not have been surprised when Seals' president Charlie Graham

came to call on the Cronin family. Graham, from nearby Santa Clara, played briefly with the Boston Americans (later named the Red Sox) in 1906 but made his mark in baseball with his thirty-year association with the Seals. He managed the team for four years beginning in 1918, but after he became the team's czar, the club won four PCL titles in the 1920s, with some of the better teams in Minor League history. Graham would have been a very impressive figure in the Cronin house, even more so when he offered Joe $300 per month to sign with the Seals for 1925. But the family did not sign right away, waiting to see if any other offers were forthcoming.

The other interested team was the Major League Pittsburgh Pirates, represented by scout Joe Devine. A native of San Francisco, Devine had had small stints as a player, including with the Oakland Oaks in 1915, and had managed Calgary in the Western Canada League in 1920 and 1921. By 1923 he was back in his native region, working as Pittsburgh's Bay Area scout. When he approached the Cronins the next year, he had not yet achieved his great fame as a scout—his biggest coup thus far had been his inking of longtime Oakland Oak Ray Kremer to a contract a year earlier. His big signings for the Pirates—including Harold Rhyne, Paul Waner, Lloyd Waner, Dick Bartell, and Arky Vaughan—were in the near future. After a stint managing the PCL Mission Reds, Devine later scouted for the New York Yankees and helped land a succession of West Coast standouts, including Joe DiMaggio, Bobby Brown, Jackie Jensen, and Gil McDougald.[28]

But all of that was in the future. Cronin had nearly made up his mind to sign with Graham when he agreed to meet Devine one final time at Klawan and McMullen's, a sporting-goods store at Mission and Fourth that operated as the social center for the city's sports enthusiasts. Devine offered Cronin a $200 bonus and $400 per month for 1925, easing Joe's decision by besting the Seals' terms. Cronin barely kept his emotions in check, telling Devine he would speak with his family at home that evening.

Mary Cronin had reservations about her son hanging around with "sporting characters" but had finally reconciled herself to his playing with the Seals, at least staying in the city. Pennsylvania was another

matter, and Mrs. Cronin did what all good Irish mothers of the time would do: she sought the advice of the family priest. "Don't you worry," consoled the Father. "He's going to be a fine ballplayer. It won't be long before you're the proudest mother in San Francisco."[29]

So the Cronins accepted Devine's offer, putting the $200 bonus towards the family's mortgage.[30] Joe Cronin, still a boy, would now begin a new life in professional baseball, far away from the only world and people he had ever known.